A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination: Insular Venice and its Lagoon

Location: Venetia

State Party: Italy

Date: 22 April 1986

B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the proposed cultural property be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of Criteria I, II, III, IV, V and VI.

C) JUSTIFICATION

The nomination of Venice to the list preceded by nine years the ratification of the World Heritage Convention by Italy. There was some concern about such a delay, which international opinion deemed inexplicable: on several occasions, notably during the discussions which preceded the elaboration of the tentative lists, the Committee expressed the wish for a short-list presentation of the most prestigious cultural properties and cited how paradoxical it was that Venice had not been included on the World Heritage List.

The initiative finally taken by the Italian government responds to this general expectation, and this is all the more positive in that the nomination concerns not only the historic centre of Venice, but the whole lagoon with its hundreds of small islands, its three "gates," the Lido, Malamocco and Chioggia; its basins and fishing areas. The geographic, historic and aesthetic coherency of this ensemble leaves no doubt.

In this lagoon covering 50,000 square kilometers, nature and history have been so closely linked since the 5th century A.D. when Venetian populations, to escape Barbarian raids, found refuge on the sandy islands of Torcello, Iesolo and Malamocco. These temporary settlements gradually became permanent and the initial refuge of the land-dwelling peasants and fishermen became a maritime power. Several key dates stand in the minds of all: the small island of Rialto was chosen as the headquarters of the new city; in 1000 A.D., Venice controlled the Dalmatian coast; in 1112, a trading market was founded in Sidon; in 1204 Venice allied with the Crusaders to capture Constantinople. The abundant booty brought back on that occasion, including St. Mark’s horses,
is only the more spectacular part of the loot from Byzantium that
the doge Enrico Dandolo shared with his allies. Under the doge a
maritime empire of unequalled power extended over the entire
length of shores along the eastern Mediterranean, to the islands
of the Ionian Sea, and to Crete.

During the entire period of the expansion of Venice, over the
centuries when it defended its trading markets against the
business undertakings of the Arabs, the Genoese and the Ottomans,
and those of the European monarchs who were envious of its power,
Venice never ceased, in the literal sense of the term, to
consolidate its position in the lagoon. The marriage with the
sea, that "sposalizio" that since 1172 was symbolized by the ring
of the doge, who had replaced the dux (elected for the first time
in 697 by an assembly of the people), was never called into
question. Defense of the site in the face of major dangers,
siltings and the destructive assault of the waters' waves, was a
matter of constant concern. From the High Middle Ages to the
18th century, the course of the rivers' waters was deviated and
controlled; the three channels through which the tide engulfs the
lagoon have continuously been rearranged; the thin strip of
shore has been protected by fences, stone piles and breakwaters.
By the time completion was achieved in 1782 of the fantastic
construction of the murazzi, a veritable dam holding back the
Adriatic, the Most Serene Republic would survive only 15 years
longer.

In this inland sea which has continuously been under threat,
rises amidst a tiny archipelago at the very edge of the waves,
one of the most extraordinary built-up areas of the Middle Ages.
From Torcello to the north to Chioggia to the south, every small
island, or nearly, had its own settlement, town, fishing village
and artisan village (e.g., Murano), but at the heart of the
lagoon, Venice stood as one of the greatest capitals in the
medieval world. When a group of tiny islands were consolidated,
nothing remained of the primitive topography but canals such as
Giu decca Canal, St. Mark's Canal and the Great Canal (according
to Commynes, "the most beautiful street in the world"), and a
network of small rii that are the veritable arteries of a city on
water. In this unreal space, where there is no notion of the
concept of terra firma, masterpieces of one of the most
extraordinary architectural museums on earth have been
accumulated for over 1,000 years. The least palazzetto, which
in Venice seems only a minor construction, would constitute the
glory of many historic cities.

Everyone is familiar with the dangers threatening the inestimable
heritage of Venice: changes in ground level and tides,
atmospheric pollution and socio-economic changes are some of the
direct or indirect consequences of the industrialization of the
zone of Mestre. These factors have posed, in new terms, the
problem of the survival of Venice. The action of the Council of
Europe, UNESCO, and of many non-governmental organizations on behalf of Venice has shown the reality of international solidarity which only great causes bring to the forefront.

Without summarizing all the actions undertaken following the flooding of 4 November 1966, ICOMOS stresses that the inclusion of Venice on the World Heritage List will further strengthen the coherency of the cultural policy of UNESCO. Venice meets all the criteria for inclusion on the World Heritage List.

- **Criterion I.** Venice is a unique artistic achievement. The city is built on 118 small islands and seems to float on the waters of the lagoon, composing an unforgettable landscape whose imponderable beauty inspired Canaletto, Guardi, Turner and many other painters. The city reveals itself instantly. The lagoon of Venice also includes one of the highest concentrations of masterpieces in the world: from Torcello Cathedral to the church of St. Mary of Salvation, all the centuries of an extraordinary Golden Age are represented by monuments of exceptional beauty: San Marco, the Palazzo Ducale, Zanipolo and Scuola di San Marco, the Crari and Scuola di San Rocco, San Giorgio Maggiore, etc.

- **Criterion II.** The influence of Venice on the development of architecture and monumental arts has been considerable. It first made its impact in all the trading markets and stations of the Most Serene Republic along the shores of Dalmatia, in Asia Minor and in Egypt, in the islands of Ionian Sea, in Euboea, in Peloponnesus, in Crete, and in Cyprus, where the monuments built were inspired by Venetian models. But at the time when this empire of the seas experienced its first defeats, Venice founded a school of a very different type, thanks to its painters. Bellini and Giorgione, then Titien, Tintoret, Veronese and Tiepolo so profoundly changed the perception of space, light and colour that they made a decisive mark on trends in painting and decoration in Europe.

- **Criterion III.** With the unusualness of an archaeological site which still breathes life, Venice bears testimony unto itself. This mistress of the seas is a link between the East and the West, between Islam and Christianity; she lives on through thousands of monuments and vestiges of a time gone by.

- **Criterion IV.** Venice possesses an incomparable series of architectural ensembles illustrating the age of its splendor. From great monuments such as Piazza San Marco and Piazzetta (the cathedral, the Palazzo Ducale, Marciana, correr Museum, Procuatie Vecchie), to the more modest residences of calli and campi in its six quarters (Sestieri), and including hospitals and charitable or cooperative institutions which in the 13th century were originally Scuole, medieval Venetian architecture, presents a complete typology whose exemplary value goes hand-in-hand with the outstanding character of an urban setting which had to adapt
to the special requirements of the site.

- **Criterion V.** In the Mediterranean area, the lagoon of Venice constitutes an outstanding example of a semi-lake settlement which has become vulnerable as a result of irreversible changes. In this coherent ecosystem where the barenes, muddy ground which alternately sinks below water level and then rises again, are as important as the islands, the houses standing on piles, the fishing villages, and the rice-fields need as much protection as the palaces and the churches.

- **Criterion VI.** Venice symbolizes the victorious struggle of mankind against the elements, and the mastery men and women have imposed upon hostile nature. The city is also directly and tangibly associated with universal history. The "Queen of the Seas," heroically gripping to her tiny islands, did not limit her horizon, either to the lagoon, or to the Adriatic, or to the Mediterranean. It was from Venice that Marco Polo (1254-1324) set out in search of China, Annam, Tonkin, Sumatra, India and Persia. His tomb at San Lorenzo recalls the role assumed by Venetian merchants in the discovery of the world—after the Arabs, but well before the Portuguese.

ICOMOS, May 1987